



Montgomery County Council

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COUNCIL MEASURES PROGRESS, CHARTS NEXT STEPS FOR "CHILDREN FIRST" INITIATIVE

The Montgomery County Council today issued a mid-term "report card" on its two-year-old "Children First Initiative," citing progress in early childhood development efforts, child care subsidies, and health insurance coverage for poor kids while giving "needs improvement" marks in preparing poor children for kindergarten and closing the gap in infant mortality and low birth weight between white and African American babies.

"Two years ago, this Council resolved to put our 250,000 County kids first with special attention to improving children's health and their readiness for school," said Council Vice President Steve Silverman. "We've made good progress, but there's lots left to do.

"We have our work cut out for us. A child is only five years old once. Children can't wait – and neither can we."

Among the accomplishments over the past two years are:

- Created an "Early Childhood Chief" to direct and manage all early childhood efforts in the County, increasing effectiveness and weeding out duplication;
- Adopted an Early Childhood Plan" and approved \$1.6 million in
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new funding to improve pre-natal care, to educate on early childhood development, to continue operation of five Parent Resource Centers, and to improve the quality of child care;

- Supported a \$440,000 state grant to establish the Judith Hoyer Early Childhood Learning Center in Silver Spring;
- Approved \$2 million in FY01 for “Linkages to Learning” school-based social and mental health services for children and their families at 18 school sites throughout the county;
- Eliminated the County’s child care subsidy waiting list of 392 families with an estimated 625 children. Two thousand five hundred families monthly receive subsidies to help working parents get quality day care;
- Increased complete childhood immunization by age two to 90 percent;
- Signed up over 4,000 additional County children for the federal, state, and locally-funded children’s health insurance programs through intensive efforts by community and school nurses, DHHS staff, and community providers;
- Approved nearly \$3 million for the first-in-the-nation local earned income tax credit – the Working Families Income Supplement, to help the working poor. Over 12,000 families have benefited;
- Invested millions of dollars in all-day kindergarten, significant class-size reductions in high need schools for kindergarten through second grade, and the Reading Initiative for all schoolchildren.

“This is a great start,” said Councilmember Silverman. “ But it’s not good enough – especially in some areas that continue to be troubling.”

Silverman referenced the report released last week by the school system that found many poor children and children from families with poor English skills did not enter into kindergarten ready to learn.

“We have rising poverty in this County in the midst of rising affluence,” said Council President Blair Ewing.

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The Council also noted the gap in infant mortality rates between white and African American babies in the County. While the white rate dropped from 5.9 to 4.1 deaths per 1,000 live births from 1998 to 1999, the African American rate increased from 15.1 to 17.4. The overall County rate in 1999 was 7.0.

“Our County goals are to reduce overall infant mortality rates to 4.5 and to reduce African American infant mortality to 9.0 in 2005 and 4.5 in 2010,” said Councilmember Blair Ewing.

“Right now, African American infant mortality is over four times greater than that of whites. We’ve got to do more – and we need to know more about infant mortality in the Latino community.”

To address areas where the County “needs improvement,” the Council endorsed:

- More effective home visiting services for families in need and at-risk;
- Expansion of CHIPS enrollment with special emphasis on outreach to immigrant communities;
- Using the efforts of the County’s African American Health Initiative and the “Baby Steps” program to immediately link newborn African American babies and their mothers with risk factors such as low birth weight to medical and support services; and
- Digging deeper in maternal interviews and other research to identify the factors leading to the infant mortality gap between white and African American babies in the County.

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